

Patricia DEMOOR-VAN DEN BOSSCHE & Martine VANDERMEULEN, *Zoeklicht op de kunst van de West-Kongo uit de verzameling van de K.U.Leuven. Vioka Vana Lumoni Lu Nkisi*, Leuven, Faculteit Letteren en Wijsbegeerten, K.U.L., 1981; Bernard de GRUNNE (ed.), *Terres cuites anciennes de l'Ouest africain*, (Publications d'histoire de l'art et d'archéologie de l'Université Catholique de Louvain, XXII), Louvain-la-Neuve, Institut supérieur d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'art, 1980, In-4°, VII & 291 p., ill.

The catalogue on Yombe art, which is labeled « Searchlight on the Art of the Western Kongo », has the provocative subtitle « Vioka vana lumoni lu nkisi », meaning « Come here before the mirror of the cult images » (p. 10). Published in conjunction with an exhibition held March 13-27, 1981, at K.U.L. (Catholic University, Leuven), the work includes the identification (p. 95-106) of 103 items. Almost half of them are anthropomorphic figurines, but there are also powder kegs, bracelets, scepters, bells, slit-drums, ivory horns, calabashes, bark boxes, one mask, and dress from the Khimba association. The objects have been assembled since about 1910 for the University collections by Leo Bittremieux, a member of the Congregation of Scheut and a missionary stationed at Kangu among the Yombe. The results of Bittremieux's pioneering ethnographic work among the Yombe were condensed in his numerous books and articles. Because these studies are mostly available only in Flemish and are written by a nonprofessional ethnographer who followed a loose format of presentation, they are ignored or inadequately used by many authors. Like the writings of Laman and Van Wing on other Kongo subgroups, however, Bittremieux's studies constitute an extremely rich, albeit difficult to follow, source of information on Yombe society and culture, and especially on their art and material culture. In assembling collections for the University and for the Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, Tervuren, Bittremieux often provided the native nomenclature for individual items and some references to usage and function, which frequently can be completed by his published writings. As is evident from the catalogue, Bittremieux was unsystematic in dispensing information; of forty-six figurines mentioned, there are no Yombe names or other specific information for twenty-eight of them (although it should be noted that the authors do not specify exactly how much information is

available for each item). Specific place indications were rarely given by Bittremieux since he tended to deal with Mayombeland as a single entity.

In the preface to the catalogue (p. 7-10), A. Maesen gives a useful sketch of the history of the University collections. Martine Vandermeulen and Patricia Demoor-Van den Bossche, two students who worked in Leuven with professors Maesen and de Mahieu, have written separate introductions to the catalogue. There is also an extensive bibliography and several field photographs, most of which appeared in earlier works by Bittremieux. Vandermeulen mainly uses Bittremieux's data and offers under the lofty title « The Yombe in dialogue with their world vision » a rather elementary sketch of Yombe social structure, initiation, headmanship, and magic and also deals with the question of values and how they are expressed in the images. The text is obviously addressed to the general public; however, some contentions (e.g., « practically all objects exhibited are somewhere magical... they can all be placed under the denomination *nkisi* », p. 34; all other figurines exhibited are in a certain sense ancestors », p. 35) would require many nuanced specifications. Since the catalogue focuses on the Yombe, a geographical delineation of Mayombeland, particularly in terms of Bittremieux's descriptions, would have been expected.

The introduction by Demoor-Van den Bossche outlines western Kongo sculpture (it is not specified whether the concept western Kongo entirely overlaps with Yombe) and concentrates on the anthropomorphic figurines. Several well-known stylistic and morphological characteristics of the sculpture are discussed (although sometimes a piece chosen as evidence is not illustrated in the catalogue, e.g., nos 22, 25, 27) and some references to usage and function are provided. Maes's old unacceptable quadripartite division of Kongo sculptures is rightly criticized, but no attempt is made to present a better one. The nomenclature developed around Kongo figurines in the published literature on African art is confusing. To a certain extent, the vast generic and specific terminology given seriatim in Bittremieux's writings could be used as a first effort to construct a more acceptable semantic classification, at least for the Yombe. Some terms used in the text are spelled differently from Bittremieux (e.g., p. 51, *niongi*, instead of *niongo*; p. 4, *funda nkata*, instead of *funda khata* or *futa lukata*). All in all, however, the introduction provides some judicious remarks, particularly on the funerary figurines (*niongo* including the *ntadi*, p. 49-51) and on the details of adornment (p. 47-48).

In the last thirty years there has been an incredible proliferation of exhibition catalogues. Most of them have done little more than bring to the attention of the scholar, the collector, and the aficionado of African art thousands of artworks scattered in museums and private collections. With few exceptions, the catalogues have not contributed to the scientific understanding of the African arts. The present catalogue has the merit of limiting its scope to a subregion of the huge Kongo cluster and to the field collection of one man. It is quite different in nature from *The Masterpieces of the People's Republic of the Congo* (1981) prepared by C. Duponcheel for the African-American Institute exhibition in New York a catalogue that abounds in generalities and imprecisions. At the same time, however, the Yombe book has missed an opportunity by failing to incorporate more of the vital data offered by Bittremieux on native terminology and actual modes of usage of the artworks (consecration and acti-

vation, probing, healing, divination, oath-taking, incantation, praise and desecration).

The modest Yombe catalogue stands in the sharpest possible contrast to the lavishly produced, ambitious, and cataloguelike book by Bernard de Grunne, *Terres cuites anciennes de l'Ouest africain* (1980). This book was produced by the Institut supérieur d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'art (at Louvain-la-Neuve) of the French-speaking counterpart of the earlier mentioned Flemish Catholic University. This institute is conspicuous in the realm of African art for its sumptuous publication of F. Neyt's book on Hemba sculpture (1977). Except for the last chapter (a dissertation abstract by J. Evrard, « Les statuettes en terre cuite du Mali », p. 283-91, which for unexplained reasons occurs only in French), the book, including the elementary captions to the plates but not the footnotes, is bilingual. The larger part of the work was originally written in French by B. de Grunne and then translated into English by C. W. Enders. Stoneham's short English text on thermoluminescence dating of the terracottas is translated into French by an unidentified source. One wonders about the purpose of these bilingual texts since in our time and age more than ever many people, not the least the scholars and connoisseurs of African art, read French and English. Far from being a definitive work, the book, moreover, is only a « premier essai de synthèse » (cover jacket) and an « attempt to draw some preliminary conclusions » (p. 2). Are the numerous descriptions of objects and the unsystematic interpretations worth translating?

The catalogue is richly illustrated by superb photographs of eighty-six sculptures (each in full-page front or side views and additional multiviews) and by forty-six smaller photographs. Since most of the pieces (derived from unspecified private collections) have not been published before, the volume is a rich source of visual documentation of terracottas, especially for the inland Niger delta and for Ghana. The extreme unevenness of coverage at once reveals that this is not an overview of West African terracottas, as the ambitious title of the book claims. Half of the work deals with terracottas from the inland delta of the Niger River, but only forty-four pages concern Nigeria and the Sao (and half of these pages include the plates and the bibliography). Whatever the work attempts to reveal about Nigeria (five Nok, one Ife, and three Benin heads) is overshadowed by the data recently provided in the *Treasures of Ancient Nigeria* catalogue by Ekpo Eyo and Frank Willett (New York, A.A. Knopf, 1980).

The most significant part of the book focuses on the inland delta and on Ghana, and here some methodological remarks are in order. The author presents a historical overview of the inland delta region and then enumerates the pre-1974 and post-1974 discoveries in the Djenne and Bamako areas. He next discusses the artistic products at hand by attempting to correlate them with particular areas, periods, and styles and to sketch some of their usages and functions. Some problems are almost unsurmountable. The geographical classifications are speculative since the « exact place of origin of the objects presented in this catalog is not known » (p. 25) and « la plupart des statuettes en terre cuite dites de Djenné proviennent de fouilles illicites et sont donc dépourvues de tout contexte archéologique culturel valable » (p. 283). The thermoluminescence dating methods leave a large margin of error. The main

tools for classification thus are morphological and stylistic criteria. As always, the validity and meaning of such classifications based on the rather uneven external descriptions of certain visual criteria are questionable. Of thirty-nine figurines illustrated and described, six (pls. 34-39) are classified as southern Bankoni style (formerly Segu or Bambara) mainly because of their longilinear and cylindrical bodies, which are matched with only one example whose correct origin in this area has been verified. For the northern groups (the Djenne style of the Mopti-KeMacina-Djenne triangle), the anthropomorphic figurines are divided into two substyles, mainly on the basis of the eye form: the multiple eyelid style (and a variant of it) and the incised eyelash style. Some sculptures do not fit into either of the substyles, and other terracottas, such as the zoomorphic representations, are virtually unclassifiable. One wonders about the significance of such loosely selected categories. The limited scope of these classifications is apparent from the catalogue of the inland delta of the Niger (p. 57-134). Thirty-three terracottas are illustrated under a « General section » and six under « the longilinear Bankoni style ». The lack of systematics is even more pronounced in the chapter on Akan terracottas with seven « ethnic » styles, in addition to the semi-closed eyelid and the naturalistic styles, and « some other styles », some of which are based on only a few figurines. The geographical method again becomes useless « as many objects' origin is not precisely identified » (p. 145).

Much of the terminology adopted by the author calls for critical scrutiny; for example, animist state (p. 4), animistic traditions (p. 6), refined style (p. 57), or « classical features in this style » (p. 227). Several broad statements also demand caution. To take only one example, the author thinks that Akan heads in « refined styles » were restricted to royal lineages... while simpler heads were destined to ordinary people... » (p. 157). From the study of usages and functions of ritual objects in African cultures, it is widely known that what looks to outsiders as simple or crude items may be charged with deep meanings. Such rudimentary objects may transcend in ritual significance the seemingly more glamorous products and be used at the highest ritual and socio-political levels.

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